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The thesis experiments with poetic structure and ideas of temporality as they inform the speakers' perceptions of location; this tension emerges from examining history and the present through the lens of interpersonal exchange, the anxieties of public identity, and social parameters. It distills for the reader a particular projection of the American South in transition, both elegizing the agrarian life and absorbing the South's urbanity.

BACK ROAD PARANOIA

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

## APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## Marching Bands in Strange Places

No one knows why  
they've appeared as suddenly  
as a flock of birds.

In the parking lot  
below the Mexican cafe  
tubas and trombones blare.  
Bass drums thump.  
Sun-glint blanks their faces,  
their robotic legs  
pounding pavement.

Salsa quakes in each bowl,  
about to spill down shirts.  
A cymbal crashes over  
the gut-string guitar piped in  
above the bathroom stalls.

Across the street a hung-over coed  
steps onto her balcony to smoke.  
They play for her, a man thinks,  
waving a pinched tortilla chip.

No one knows why  
Sousa's been fused  
with "Satisfaction."

But the onlookers welcome  
this brief spectacle, pause  
from scarfing burrito lunches  
or in between cigarette drags,  
bass drums unbuttoning  
dress shirts and blouses  
to the April air. If only for now.

## Prospero Performs at Birthday Parties

Only spells for party tricks survive.  
These days bats fly from Caliban's  
bowler when he lifts it, and Prospero waves  
his hand around, like a shriveled madman.  
Saturdays they dress in sequined capes;  
kids sit cross-legged, mouths wide open  
at the routine of saws, the monster's limbs  
cut into twenty pieces like a cake.

### Thirteen

Before the wrecking ball swung  
into the house on Dunlop,  
a friend dared me to camp  
all night in the basement that looked  
like a fallout shelter proofed for the end,  
dented cans of peas stacked beside  
jarred beets, gasoline, moth-gnawed  
blankets. As I sneaked around  
that concrete cave, my flashlight peeled  
up the stairs. Rats scratched  
nests among the kitchen's chipped cups.  
The moon wrung its dusty hands above  
the piano I unsheeted  
in a room where I struck  
the cracked keys that woke  
my teenage voice.



## Small Town Id

Green firework flare in the gut,  
at fourteen I didn't get what

fleshed it into sin, its neon  
aurora fluorescing my skin.

Belinda and Cindy both hid  
beneath my bed, those two nude

pin-ups. I locked the door, ashamed.  
God's distress never seemed a sham

back then, on 2nd Avenue.  
*Repent. Buy a brand spanking new*

*life with a heated swimming pool,*  
the Book should've read. Terrible

consequences buzzed in my ear,  
like a gnat's single phrase, over

my drooling at bared breasts. Sig Freud  
would've said fuck it, unafraid

of churchgoers' ridicule. But  
he never lived in the South. Smut

was deemed erotic in Vienna.  
Cigar smoke rose as dogma

for the horniest heretics  
of the old world, all of them lunatics.

1896

Only two roads wound  
through Britton's Neck  
where my family's skin  
took on the weathered look  
of barns. My great great  
grandfather Tony never thought  
about the Victorian hogwash  
in Marion. Aggravated  
with the packed dirt, he stomped  
on his hat even if  
a preacher's wagon passed,  
plowing until supper.  
Agnes, his wife, heaped  
chicken bog onto eleven  
plates, then tomatoes,  
butter beans, biscuits.  
After the sweat-beaded  
heat sank beyond  
the pasture, he craved  
a swig of stump hole.  
Blistering days of cured  
tobacco and firing bricks  
in the kiln lasted a hundred  
years for those Watsons, rural  
lives I sometimes envy  
in the city without a lawn.  
Ending at my salesman  
father, their routines rusted  
before I was born. Yet  
in a frequent dream I have,  
our patriarch yawns  
into his field. The crescent  
moon is gone. His grizzled  
haint squats among the weeds.

## Half-Rural

In my half-rural brain a city spreads  
beyond its paved edges until no more  
pines cramp roadsides watching swerves  
and crashes at the usual hours of day,  
until bland houses people a town with no  
signs of slowing down, until a mowed  
box of grass satisfies a man  
who knows he won't be buried there.

## Elegy for my Busted Six-String

Lugging you everywhere,  
I watched my boyhood rust  
along your frets. Your strings stirred  
the Atlantic's folding note  
inside your gut. My sweaty hands  
rubbed along your spine and nape.  
Every 7<sup>th</sup> chord I plucked  
on you let me haunt the bars  
near the train tracks of Clarksdale.  
I'm sure you saw the devil  
in his dark glasses more times  
than you cared to twang about.  
Out-of-tune, you buzzed  
with your past, the pulpy music  
of red-billed beak and swung ax.

## Sonatina

1.

If her heart's  
a pin-pulled grenade,  
I wave the white flag.

2.

It smears on the sole  
of my shoe, fresh dropped  
bad luck, a step  
I can't avoid  
stumbling home  
from Bar None at 3 a.m.

3.

One record she forgot  
ghosts Mahler inside my ear.  
Tonight I hear the unrehearsed  
phrases of her breath,  
recall the way we both  
undressed in the dark.  
The bassoon and oboe  
decrescendo.

## Visiting the Elsewhere Museum

to the artist Joseph Cornell d. 1972

To avoid the cold a while walking downtown, I toured  
a curio museum. Somewhere you might've felt at home,  
staring at its sea of plastic dolls and toy cars, gramophone  
hiss in your ear, fingers crawling along book spines, the spiders'  
nostalgia, junk a grandmother crammed in every corner  
of her Elm Street store. What didn't get sold. I heard that one  
day junk tidal-waved from one high-ceilinged room into another,  
a thundering splash of blue-paged atlases. Plunged under,  
two mannequins and a dress maker's dummy drowned.  
When the far-out grandson found them, a hairless arm speared  
through, grabbing handfuls of air. Now the store clutters on  
as a museum. I could barely move in there. Clocks in there  
watched me walk past, cracked, yellow faces frozen at the hour  
each slipped into artifact. I'd describe the dust they wore  
as grainy TV snow. Guts of a piano, an evening gown,  
a photograph of Ellington. *Wait for the ballroom to swarm  
in your head*, my tour guide suggested. But I didn't spend long.

Fifty years you ate hurriedly at the usual diner, then combed  
Manhattan's junk, too much to fill a taxi trunk, then returned  
to the balmy afternoon. At five you caught the subway home,  
leafed through "The Penny Arcade" dossier, the day scribbled down  
in detail on paper scraps you'd pull from your pocket later  
as you grabbed the shell, the red rubber ball, the bent-to-hell spoon  
to arrange a certain way. Yet that museum's scattered nature  
might've bothered you last night. "Installation of the Mundane,"  
you could've called it, pondering where to situate a chair,  
an art deco radio, a disconnected telephone,  
in your mock living room—you'd think, *Put this here and leave it there.*

## Modern Pompeii

A cinder-frozen dog sniffs apocalypse beside an iron pot. Unlicked plates turn up heaped with gray crumbs, on the floor, bowls in sleeping quarters and horse stables. Drinking at the hotel later, Vesuvius their terrace view, archaeologists conclude Pompeians ate like modern folks—in hurries or too tired to cook after work. But no mosaic depicts a household god eating his dimly-lit dinner alone. Instead open air restaurants peer into the streets. No lines bend around each block. There's no evidence of where awkward patrons drew in the dirt with their sandals, waiting for stew. The owners don't toast the unexpected sun.

## Your Grandparents Are Bored with the Afterlife

What if Death is the mayor of an island town,  
photographed by all the newspapers in that town.

Cameras blind the blonde slender girls he kisses—  
your grandmothers look twenty, new around town.

Your grandfathers shoot pool and drink beer all day  
then stumble to their houses on the edge of town.

A cable car heads nowhere, hums into the dusk,  
sparking the noise they eat their dinners by in town.

Then your grandparents flick on TVs and watch snow.  
Some nights they jitterbug in smoky clubs downtown.

Death looks down from his high-windowed suite  
at the taxis arrowing like meteors across town.

His pin-up model girlfriend lures him to bed.  
“Morty,” she purrs, “You’re the luckiest man in town.”



## Routine

Umbrellas and jackets drip ellipses  
to each apartment door. A mailman hates  
the clouds shutting out the pollen-swollen sun.  
At dinner he will tell his dull wife how  
addresses never leave his brain the way  
faces do, that postcards gush from the hole  
in his canvas bag and wind-weave  
up Mendenhall. Tomorrow a trash truck  
will groan; a car alarm will crow  
ten minutes in the street. Then he will flick  
bits of sleep from his eyes like ants,  
crunch a bowl of Cornflakes, and forget  
he dreamed wild dogs roamed the block.

## Back Road Paranoia

Every time I fumbled with her bra  
she fumbled for my fly, that bra

her finger unlatched like a screen  
door. Crickets clung to the screen

of her lifted window, late hour hiss  
low on the radio; if gravel hissed

up the long drive, we heard  
it. "Sneak out. And don't be heard,"

she said, so like an acned spy  
I arrowed through the dark, a spy's

back road paranoia winding inside  
me—I was a little bruised inside,

I'd confess. Near a corn field my car  
battered by miles and wrecks, the car

my father paid a grand for, waited.  
Thinking she'd meet me, I waited

the next night beside the telephone,  
bored and hard. But my telephone

never startled the tabby cat asleep  
in the hall, never rang once. I fell asleep

before the monster trampled town.

## Dry Months

Last night, at God-knows-what-hour, I stared  
at a wall of pines, not at the owl homing in  
on rats, but at the pines, until I forgot about  
the town beyond them, forgot its street names,  
sitting with my black dog on the cement steps.  
Pine tops twitched, like huge flames on the spires  
of a church. And for the first time in months I missed  
the matches of her fingertips singeing my hair,  
as the wind picked up. A flask of her breath  
would've been a luxury among the mosquitoes.

## Game Show

for Jonathan Butler

Between hospital cups of chipped ice  
in bed, a grandmother's mesmerized  
by the host's white surge of hair on *The Price  
Is Right*. She mouths at the TV what each prize  
retails for. Dice shake inside her throat.  
Dressed in photographs like Jackie O.  
thirty years ago, now she tries to blurt,  
"Nineteen seventy-five," or "I'm no Pinko!"

Morty Death's toupee's positioned perfectly.  
He loves the microphone, kisses the women,  
directs them to a light-bulbed bonus wheel.  
They spin to win a trip to some holy city,  
a red Nirvana with a karmic engine,  
days curled and purring at a windowsill.

## Mano y Mano

After slipping off his sequined robe  
Monday night, the Nature Boy moons  
the front row of redneck homophobes  
when the American Dream yanks down  
his rival's crimson trunks going for the pin.  
But the Nature Boy reverses, struts,  
wooing at the scarred up Dream.  
No doubt half the crowd would cuss  
if the subtext of suplex and body slam  
ever got discussed like a Roman text.  
Each week this rematch—always the same  
swung chair and submission hold—transfixes  
the basement loser and the fuming hick—  
pimpled guys unlucky with the chicks.

## Apparition on a Shovel

for Ray McManus

Barn door hinges squeal like bats,  
the barn's throat guzzling  
moonlight. Among spider webs  
the farmer asks the face his flashlight  
beams on, "Why are you here,"  
with his slow, amazed tongue,

saying, "I looked for you in the bark  
where I scratched my name as a kid.  
My hair's like field stubble now.  
If my thumb grazes your face,  
don't crumble into coins of mud."

## No Souvenir

Soon my dad would leave.  
Still my parents rented  
a beach house, the rooms big  
as whale bellies. They hid  
their arguments.

Not until the scrapers hauled off  
bumper cars, unbolted and trucked  
away the coasters, did I realize  
what my parents must've said  
beneath those neon bulbs.

I tilted my neck to the blinking air.

Did they watch me dwindle  
from the swaying bucket  
of the Ferris wheel  
until I was a T-shirt speck, my hair a lit  
match shifting in the heat?

Afterward they acted fine.  
The Atlantic mumbled  
on about its one subject,  
the sweaty August dusk no souvenir.

## Summer's Last Mosquito

is childhood kazooing down Main Street  
where sunburned talk on the sidewalk drags on  
and the day goes by as slow as a hearse.

If only a clown troupe could pop out when  
the pallbearer cracks the door in disbelief  
and fear. My curiosity dog-ears that page.

*I'll come back*, I always say, then ignore  
the book. I slap my face, as if splashing it  
above the bathroom sink. I check my palm.



## Can't Help It If I'm Lucky

Rod Serling anticipates every step  
I make, waits at every corner I come to.  
When he's not foretelling fate, he bums  
cigarettes or an egg sandwich at 2,  
bored as a wax figure on my stoop.  
He talks about the late night luck of bums.

Then as I leave, he says, "A Mr. Josh  
Watson has just stepped into a chaos  
he's unprepared for. Plagued by platitudes  
since a child, he's fueled by the attitude  
that matters unfold as they will on Mendenhall.  
He sees her familiar shadow leave the bar  
and calls her name. Not looking back at all  
she sways into the dark then disappears."

## Ran into the Fortune Teller

"Stare at your palm like it's a highway map,"  
the fortune teller says. *It's a highway map*  
*I never bother looking at.* (She shuffles  
her cards.) *Why in the fuck didn't you drink*  
*with the others until the evening show*  
*started. Don't worry. Whatever she shows*  
*you won't get foreseen in detail. You'll still drink*  
*cheap-ass whiskey, hypnotize any girl*  
*in the crowd, play strung-out.* (Now the die  
must fall.) *I don't know why I shuffled*  
*in here, an hour to spare.* "Beware, a girl  
will hear your voice then rise from the tie-dye  
sea to pull you down," this gypsy woman tells  
me. *Well, well, well, you can never tell.*

## Blood on Your Saddle

Your motorcycle smashes into a tree.  
Welcome to a life with a different face,  
shards of a neck, scraped-off skin and tree  
bark, leaves scattered like pocket change. Face  
it, the highway you craved brought you here.  
Blacked out a while, you don't recall  
where you're at. The sky features vultures.  
"Did they tear off your shirt?" You won't recall,

when your wife tries to ask you later.  
As you wreck her words, fuel will spill from her mouth.  
You'd better listen. Watch. Sooner or later  
she'll pack her bags and go. You'll mouth  
what she hates to hear, why it headed south,  
why it dead-ended, crashed. Why you veered.

## Every Time I Crawl Past Your Door

Panicked pigeons spray from the hedge.  
And I duck, wounded, make a narrow escape  
down the street. I edge along garbage cans, hedge-  
dive when I spot your dress, my half-baked escape  
plan smudged on a matchbook. *A bombshell*  
*will screw a man* rattling through my head.

Lately, no matter where I'm headed  
I watch the air. "Around here a bombshell  
dropping from the sky isn't that rare,"  
our mailman tells me. Is he playing dumb?  
Years of carrying bad news has numbed  
his face. Crawling past your door I wear  
dark glasses, a glue-on beard, a fedora,  
a blue shirt sweated through with paranoia.

## I Met the Mirror-eyed Martians

As if I'd been drinking with Toulouse-Lautrec  
all night I woke up foggy in a chair  
they hovered above. Devoid of *Star Trek*  
dweebness, they aimed no ray guns. "Stare.  
I don't mind," I said. They welcomed me,  
spoke my name. Women marveled at my hair  
issuing like smoke from my skull, I an oddity  
mirror-eyed Martians wished to keep.  
I told them filthy jokes, armpit farted, peed  
in a vase, blared "Free Bird" while they tried to sleep.  
Who knew they'd get fed up and beam me back.  
At breakfast they stirred glowing cereal, peach-  
colored creatures bowed over bowls, my packed  
bag by the door. They left me where I parked.

## After a B Monster Movie

The swamp creature returns, then stumbles  
to a trailer park. On camera he plans  
something far more sinister than  
hotwiring the teenage hero's motorcycle.  
Winnebagoes wake up to his roaming stomp-  
prints and Technicolor slime smears their doors.  
The dogs disappear. When this nightmare's  
projected onto a screen no one sleeps  
in the dark for weeks. Dr. Fangs, the Werewolf,  
and the Mutant Tree that totters like a bear  
through pine shadow, go drink, tearing off  
their costumes, at a dive where bar flies stare  
into those beer mirrors terrified  
at each reflected pair of zombie eyes.

## Watching Them Bury Grandpa

*No summer digging in the country dirt  
for you, you'd never last long days where  
the only way to clean your hands is spit,*

your grandfather told you. He used to swear—  
his farm cropped down to eleven acres—  
*No summer digging in the country dirt*

*means you're dead.* But he finally quit  
cranking tractors at ninety and lived three years.  
The only way to clean your hands is: spit

into your palms, then rub them together.  
You can eat and sleep until he yells, *Back to it.*  
*No summer digging in the country dirt*

ends before dark, it doesn't matter,  
even if you gash your thumb. Soaked in sweat,  
the only way to clean your hands is spit.

After the lid's been sprinkled black, you drift  
through a pasture nobody plows—there's  
no summer. Digging in the country dirt  
the only way to clean your hands is spit.

## Swamp

His boat weaves between the bulging stumps.  
A man snores like a wet frog in love  
with the mud of sleep, among sandwiches  
wrapped by his wife, crushed beer cans,  
a deserted cricket box. Then the boat's jarred.  
And he wakes up. A rotten rope swings  
above his head, almost mistaken for a water  
moccasin in the sun. The man's glided  
into the swamp where his grandfather watched  
mosquito eggs hatch; here vultures wheeled,  
plucking a body bitten by a thousand fleas,  
after old Fox shotguns jabbed the ribs  
and drawls scattered in the weeds.



Confederate Dead Statues Should Aim North\*

Marion, South Carolina ca. 1964

Boredom turned his beard white, the drunks swore.  
Here and there, he bayoneted a pigeon or two.  
Beach traffic bulleted past with no regard for red lights.

Gazing south sixty years through the sprinkler spray  
of Main Street, a swamp-gray stoic, he'd kept his wounds  
of homesickness gauzed, his grandsons ignoring him—until

a camera from Buffalo caught the town's mistake.  
Then he about-faced. Still, afternoons were banged-up cars  
dead-ending at the outskirts of his stare.

\*A Confederate dead statue mistakenly facing south represented retreat.

## Bergman Mentions Bibi Andersson on his Deathbed

I was captivated by the way  
no Sartre quote could woo her into bed.  
Cameras purred for her blonde hair, that hip-sway  
I was captivated by. The way  
she laughed, I knew I'd seduce her one day  
with my gaunt-faced humor. Like I said,  
I was captivated by the way  
no Sartre quote could woo her into bed.

She wouldn't hear dilemmas over God  
at twenty-one. She perfumed the stale air  
of every room we undressed in. It's not odd  
she wouldn't hear dilemmas—over God,  
over my marriage—I was a bleak old toad  
at thirty-eight. Sleeping with her co-stars  
she wouldn't hear dilemmas. Over God,  
at twenty-one, she perfumed the stale air.

## Field Beneath Fingernails

Elms wear their hairnets of fog,  
the air outside thick as shaving cream.  
Faucet-hiss, rinsed off razor, that face  
you'll assume is yours will splash  
in the mirror and resemble  
your father's face one day.  
*Only a little, right? Not too much.*  
The woman next to you moves closer,  
yawning at your bathroom sink.

Your traveling salesman father swears  
when you talk about moving  
to your dead grandpa's farm to dig  
its measured-off dirt. *There's no future  
in it. And your back will hurt  
like a man's who tars highways.*

If you dug this damn town at all,  
you wouldn't ditch it for grubby work skin  
in the country sun. To live with field  
beneath your fingernails would steer  
the wheel back fifty years. The suburbs  
would return to kudzu and barns.

## Dry Months #2

From the air the city is a shattered  
ant farm, its spill of ants headed  
toward the drying up ponds  
of tobacco spit. Sedans caravan  
past mirages that puddle  
on macadam. Drinking glasses blonde  
with dust wait for cracked lips  
inside restaurants. No one explains  
wind coughing over vacant lots,  
where the dens of animals  
turn into small deaf ears  
jabbed by dousing rods.

## Grandpa Dead

Lift its twine-strung nail  
from the latch and his shed door whines  
open. But his pine lid's packed shut  
with church dirt—the catch  
that only disappears once the grime  
of sleep cakes my eyes.

Lazarus  
was a lucky s.o.b. But Death came  
again, his sandals thudding up dust  
in the small courtyard. "If not today,"  
he sang like a wasp, the air afuss  
with pigeon traffic.

I can't even say  
what I rummage for among Mason jars,  
bolts from the belly of a Chevrolet,  
tossed, then forgotten, inside a drawer,  
two buckets of chicken feed. My hands  
crawl like blind rats and plunder  
the dust, whatever piled up junk bends  
the leaky tin roof.

Mumbling ahead  
of me late one afternoon  
before rain, grandpa hobbled, ducked  
into the shed. I followed him back  
to a twilit, gray wall  
where his shriveled index finger glided  
along the sockets of a buck skull  
then counted thirteen tines.  
I couldn't nod off his voice,  
my brain drunk on his drawl,

leaning on the door. He's still  
down the road from here, beneath soaked  
plastic flowers. They don't coax  
him from the mud. Neither does moonshine,  
or the endless, dumb barking of a dog  
that still waits on him to wake up  
in the black coffee dawn.

## Chihuahua, the Dictator's Ideal Dog

In between carafes of sangria  
a dictator adjusts his eye patch.  
Then with his magnetic reach, he snatches  
up the shivering dog that defecates  
inside his boots, that always defects  
from the terrace. The dictator's eye  
is a black-balling marble. It frightens  
the dog. The after-dinner talk of owls  
rises from their newspaper nests. Last week  
he ordered all the zoo cages unlocked.  
Since vigilantes won't leave their shacks,  
apes loot cafes; tigers pillage butcher shops.  
Before that, a machine detongued the church  
bells, so now no one hears the hour  
in the city below his guarded cliff.  
Tonight he measures up the dog trapped  
in his hands, debating drunkenly  
if he should crush its skull or let it yap.

The Bitter End, October 1962

A newspaper folded beneath his arm,  
Dylan walks into the bar where his friends  
pick guitars. Why aren't they alarmed  
by Khrushchev, Cuba, the uncertain end?  
They crack their knuckles. They tell dirty jokes.  
Baby-faced Dylan lights a smoke and laughs,  
tuning up to howl the song he wrote  
on the subway uptown. A fiddler passes  
around a gray fedora collecting change.  
For his next number, Dylan wants to sing  
the Carters' "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?"  
No one can drown out his bitter twang,  
not even Cronkite. He swigs whiskey late  
into the night, mimics Guthrie, and waits.

## Aubade

Insomniacs see their ceiling fans  
as spinning wheels of fate. At 4 a.m.

before the avenue's buttered evenly  
in the first humid hours of the day,

only they hear the baker sing.  
(He's just arrived.) Windows crack. They listen.

Minutes finished on the clock turn over  
with the oblivious red eyes of partiers,

and go into a sleep that's deeper than  
the flowerbed. All night cicadas whined

among shrubbery in the deserted yards,  
buzzing through the hallways of tired ears.



## A Flea at Dinner

for Allen Miller

A flea freckles Corinna's breast.  
Yet Ovid can't pluck it off,  
before it swiftly bites and leaves  
a dawn-pink bump. He can't even  
tell her it's appeared—a gladiator  
on the arena's white sand  
seen from a distance, a small speck  
for an unsparing thumb.

Her wine-buzzed dinner guests  
don't suspect she'll undress  
Ovid later while her husband snores  
at home. Her hooked Ovid squirms.  
For now, they all gorge on roasted pig.  
The husband feeds her snails. She tugs  
at her earring, signaling her  
false pleasure since she can't avert

her blue gaze, blow a kiss or flirt.  
Ovid watches as the flea leaps  
off her cleavage like its a cliff—  
off to explore her underbrush.  
The hobbled stable slave  
never overhears the epic  
trysts Corinna and her lover sneak—  
a lover who only fathers moans.

## Nature Mort

A still life artist paints some gloomy fruit  
that either buys him a seaside villa where  
he meets his mistress on weekends, or it gets  
sold at some highway auction barn beside  
a deck of Tarot cards that might've foretold  
Houdini's sad fate. When his wife kicks him out  
for good, she throws his crate of objects  
into the street. Dog piss on the cracked wine  
bottles, flies peppering oranges. On the stumble home  
the still life artist's nostrils flare at steak sizzle.  
His wife lugs his bags to the yard. He'll peer  
into a rain puddle a long while before the gate  
clinks or that sun Gauguin would envy sinks.  
The lawn flamingo and metal rooster snore.

After Too Much Larkin

Back then her name used to leave me flushed.  
*It's awful hot in Hell*, my box springs muttered,  
whenever I imagined her undressed

alone, two summers before I was finished  
with that town for good. I never slept with her  
back then. Her name used to leave me flushed

though, the high school siren who brushed  
me off. But that teenage ache fueled pleasure  
whenever I imagined her undressed—

skinny-dipping, underthings flung on a bush,  
naked nights on a dirt road in her car.  
Back then her name used to leave me flushed

and dizzy. Back then I daydreamed one name, *Josh*,  
salted her mouth like a steamed oyster,  
whenever I imagined her undressed.

She never kissed me once. I was too bookish.  
I knelt to the Saint of Being Crushed a year.

Letter to Chad, the Last Owner of a Used Book

Dear Chad:

If you're not dead, you're probably married.  
But not to Carol. I imagine you five years ago:  
you'd drive to her apartment a couple nights  
a week to smoke and fuck. Then she'd wear  
your wrinkled shirts half-buttoned  
those mornings when her furnace wheezed  
like a firebreather's lungs. But now you live  
in a different city with your wife, and never tell  
her about the compass tattooed on Carol's hip,  
the one you must've undressed a hundred times  
at the beach when you were both eighteen.  
I don't doubt that Carol wonders if you flip  
through this book—look, I've scribbled  
my name. She might think you open it  
to the page where her note's black ink  
now smears beneath my hands.  
I felt somewhat rude reading what she wrote  
for you that afternoon I perused used books  
with an old girlfriend. I admit that. If you sold  
these poems for two or three bucks  
out of heartbreak, to rid yourself of her,  
I understand. Do you want them back?  
If so, I'll scratch my name out and ship  
them to your city just so you can shelve  
them beside an outdated atlas.

Yours, Josh Watson.

## Ides of March

Cramped in dens too long they rise  
and rush toward the highway, spring  
into its gusts, their cabin fever worse  
than mine, I'm sure. My window down, I cringe  
at the gut-spilled dog, the tire-blackened possum  
belly-up, the fox smacked in mid-dash.  
I never shovel them into the weeds, never swerve—  
like the old man taught me—instead  
I crank up the Dead, glad  
each glimpse of shitty luck disappears  
when I look back. Stuck at a stop light,  
where I'm going or a woman I've held  
should occupy my head. Not how fortune flips  
suddenly, how a rabbit scabs the road.

Neanderthal Orpheus Townsend

with a line from Sir David Attenborough

Music, sadly, doesn't fossilize  
in a cave, but its mallet marks survive,  
drummed on the walls, the incoherent thump.

But let me refrain from making jokes  
about a rock opera sixty thousand years  
back. His history isn't exact by any means.

A flute of vulture bone archaeologists unearthed  
nearly breathes through its grass-spit reed.  
Don't get me wrong— it moans,

but with the tunes we improvise and not  
his long-gone riffs. I assume his body, too, hummed  
like a jukebox starving for coins. When fed,

he flourished, then smoothed  
out his grooves beside the home fire.